A Debate on Dalits and Affirmative Action in Nepal

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Social inequality remains an important feature of Nepali society with denial of equal access to education, jobs and legislatures for marginalised communities being an endemic problem. Some positive measures have been taken in recent times to address these issues through the policy of affirmative action. The need for affirmative action and its impact on Nepali society is examined in this article considering the theoretical debates on the subject in the international context.

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The term "affirmative action" has been used since the early 1960s when President John F Kennedy of the United States employed it in the Executive Order No 10925 (assigned to the secretary of labour the job of specifying rules and implementation) to describe public policies intended "to overcome the present effects of past racial discrimination" (Louis 2005: 141). The terms, i e, "preferential treatment", "reverse discrimination", "positive discrimination", etc, are interchangeably used to mention similar provisions of affirmative action. Basically it is an arrangement, whereby the law sanctions special measures or differences in treatment to the different persons or groups. The basis for a provision is that there should be the existence of a certain condition which demands such special measures departing from the principle of formal equality. Therefore, the aim of affirmative action is to protect or promote the welfare of a person or a group who/which was previously marginalised, suppressed or discriminated (Leaber 1991).

Generally, affirmative action is seen as a mechanism to do away with socio-economic, political and cultural inequalities (ibid). Bhimrao Ambedkar suggested four or more remedies to be employed in combination to ensure equal opportunity as well as fair access and participation of the marginalised sections in the social, political and economic process in the society. These included equal rights, legal safeguards against violation of rights in terms of punitive measures, measures to ensure equal access and participation through reservation policy in civil, political and economic spheres, and a definite strategy by the state for the development and empowerment of marginalised to compensate for exclusion in the past (Thorat et al 2005: 16-22). This comprehensive formula was suggested by Ambedkar after he realised the limitation of anti-discrimination laws (Rodrigues 2002: 33), reservation and affirmative action, etc. He, then, put special responsibility on the state saying that "the uplift of the Depressed Classes will remain a pious hope unless the task is placed in the forefront of all governmental activities". Also, he puts forward his doubt about the implementation of laws and other pro-discriminated policies "unless equalisation of opportunities is realised in practice by a definite policy and determined efforts on the part of government". In a memorandum submitted to the Round Table Conference in 1930, Ambedkar observed:

> In and for each provinces and in and for India, it shall be the duty and obligation of the Legislative and the Executive or any other Authority established by law to make adequate provision for the education, sanitation, recruitment in public services and other matters of social and political advancement of Depressed Classes.

He not only suggested having a statutory obligation to maintain a separate administrative division to "watch the interests of

the Depressed Classes and promoting their welfare", but also advocated for the representation of the people from Depressed Classes "in preparation and formulation of the general policy of the government". In fact, he advocated not only the necessity of seats for them in the legislature but also seats in the cabinet saying that the first provides "power to influence the government action", but the latter provides "opportunity to frame general policy of the government" (Thorat et al 2005: 20-23).

Nepal Dalits as Marginalised Groups

Though the meaning of the word "dalit" is depressed, suppressed and marginalised, the term has been established as a common caste identity of the formerly untouchables among the different caste groups in the Hindu society. The word "dalit", which was first popularised in India, has been used in Nepal since 2024 BS (1967) after the formation of Nepal National Dalit Janavikas Council (Ahuti 2004). The tradition of untouchability and caste-based discrimination, which is a special product of the Hindu social order that developed in the Indian subcontinent over thousands of years, is dominant in south Asia. This doctrine divides people into the pure and impure based on their birth. In fact, king Jayasthiti Malla of Kathmandu in the 13th century and king Ram Shah of Gorkha in the 18th century established various decrees to rigidify the caste system in Nepal, and Rana prime minister Janga Bahadur Rana calcified it as characteristic of the law of the land when he issued the Civil Code of 1854. The code designated dalits as untouchables; the water they touched was to be deemed contaminated by impurities, and dalits were to be excluded from all sociocultural activities. For dalits, activities aimed at studying to acquire knowledge, adopting a trade or vocation with the intention of earning a better living or organising the community politically became entirely prohibited.

According to the second Life-Standard Survey, 2003-04, the average income per person of the dalits accounts for Nepali Rupees (NR) 12,144, whereas for the Newars it is NR 38,193; brahmin/chhetri 24,399. In the past 15 years poverty decreased to around 25%, but still 46% of the dalit population are under the absolute poverty line. A study that was undertaken in Parbat and Baglung district by the self-sustainability Forum in 2002-03 states that there were 77% dalits who were dependent on agricultural subsistence but were unable to solely survive on that. Also, though the literacy rate of Nepal was 54% in 2001, literacy rate for dalits was only 33.79%, which increased from 28.8% in 1991. It is also reported that 43% children of hill dwelling dalits, and 76% children of dalits from the Terai, are still out of school though Nepal occupies the 14th position (Darnal 2009) in the world in terms of the social inclusion after it acquired an inclusive Parliament/Constituent Assembly elected in 2008.[1]

The 100 caste/ethnic groups mentioned by the Census 2001 in Nepal include 44 ethnic groups, 35 high castes, 15 dalit castes and six others. If we re-categorise the groups in terms of their literacy rate, one finds 16 ethnic, 12 high caste and four others in the upper position which is similar to the national average and higher literacy rate. Interestingly, no dalit caste is eligible to be in the better off groups based on literacy. Likewise, 28 ethnic, 19 high caste and seven dalit caste, along with two others, are in the next group which has a literacy rate between 25.4% and 53.3%. Moreover, seven dalit castes, four high castes and a single ethnic group are in the group which has less than 24% literacy rate (Gurung 2007:90). Table 1 shows various indicators comparing dalits and other sections of the population.

Table 1: Situation of Dalits in Various Indicators

Indicators	Groups	Status (Percentage)
Economically active population	High caste	35.4
	Dalits	11.9
Teachers/technicians	High caste	62.2
	Dalits	1.6
Judiciary/administration	High caste	58.3
	Dalits	1.3
Clerk	High caste	53.6
	Dalits	3.9
Sales/service	High caste	42.2
	Dalits	4.0
Agriculture/fishery	High caste	37.1
	Dalits	10.9
Production labour	High caste	21.2
	Dalits	20.3
Basic	High caste	19.1
	Dalits	22.6

Source: Harka Gurung, "Positive Discrimination in the Context of Nepal" in Purna Basnet and Suvash Darnal (ed.), *The Politics of Special Rights and Reservation*, Kathmandu, Jagaran Media Center, 2007, p 89. (In Nepali language); Table modified by the author.

Table 2 shows the recent composition of different groups in the officers' rank in the civil service.

Table 2: Caste-Ethnic Representation in the Civil Service
(Officer Level Only in 2006-07)

Caste/Ethnicity	Total Population	Total Number	Percentage
Brahmin	12	4,721	58.3
Chhetri	16	1,080	13.3
Newar	5	1,152	14.2
Ethnic groups	38	264	3.3
Dalits	13	74	0.9
Madhesi	32	805	9.9

Source: Santa Bahadur Gurung, a report presented to Ministry of General Administration, 2006-07 cited in Madhunidhi Tiwari "Civil Service of Federal Nepal", *Himal Khabar Patrika*, Jestha 1-15, 2066.

Affirmative Action in Nepal

This section is based on my fieldwork which I have conducted in 2008-09 in Birendranagar Municipality of Surkhet district. This place was selected considering it was the headquarters of the mid-western development region of Nepal with three zones and 15 districts, with the objective to examine and generalise the situation of dalits in the entire region. Two hundred and forty four dalit households – 48 government employees, 36 private entrepreneurs, 28 politicians and 132 students – were surveyed by administering a schedule in collecting their socio-economic and demographic background along with other related information. This section is based on in-depth interviews of about 25% of the total respondents – 12 government employees, nine entrepreneurs, 10 politicians, and 33 students, which were conducted with the help of semi-structured schedules.

Generally, there is a belief in Nepal that dalits have a consensus to introduce 20% quota at all levels (Pyakurel 2010), as it is practised in India, though Nepali dalit movement prefers to give different names, i e, special rights, reservation, affirmative action, etc. If we go into

further details, one can find a clear division among dalits on the issue of overcoming the problem; the division is not on other issues but whether to give priority to overcome from the caste-based discriminations and atrocities first, or to go for the inclusive policy to bring the dalits into politico-economic mainstream. Let me first discuss those who want to get rid of the caste system but did not find a solution. They are among those dalits who are or were based in the rural areas, and have/had faced caste-based atrocities personally. They often argue for establishing dignity in the society so that they could opt for other options for their further empowerment. The first generation dalits, especially the local level politicians and teachers, are the main advocates of this line.

"It is wrong to get this or that benefit in the name of dalits. I do not want to bear the 'dalit' word as *Ghado[burden]* in getting some short-term benefits and luxuries", Kaluram Dhaulakoti[2] argues. "I do not believe in blessing…blessing is like sympathy… one cannot do much if he/she gets blessing to be in an institution", he further argues.

"I am against the categorisation as dalit. I suggest the word should be avoided…we should encourage all to remove their surnames and make them equal in terms of caste. Then, the available facility should be distributed to all who are poor and economically marginalised". Khagisara Nepali, a dalit teacher argues. She narrates how she had to hide their dalit identity[3] while she, along with her husband who works for Nepal army, was staying in Kathmandu in a rented room, and argues that removing the practice of caste-based prejudices must be in top priority. She does not believe that the affirmative action policy, which offers some subsidies to someone to enter into jobs and other opportunities related to social mobility, would help eradicate the caste-based prejudices. "Why the facility or subsidy (in the name of affirmative action) are needed by those who have their own houses of 5-6 floors in the city, and who can afford sending their children to an expensive school for study" as it cannot help get rid of the caste-based practice, she puts forward a counter-question.

"I was denied being greeted by many people in the society when I was first elected as member saying 'who greets a *Damini* (a derogatory term used to abuse women from tailor and musician dalit community)...even today, on several occasions, people, especially women counterparts, refuse to eat the food touched by us…they refuse the available cooked food items on some pretext or the other, e g, they have a severe stomach pain, are suffering from gastritis, etc," Raju Nepali, a district level dalit leader of the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist-Leninist mentions. She terms such practices as "civilised untouchability", which according to her, "cannot be observed directly".[4]

Discrimination Reproduced

The conclusion she draws is that caste-based prejudices cannot be removed but is reproduced in a different shape until people know one's caste. Here, one's social status or mobility based on political and economic opportunities, which could be gained through the introduction of affirmative action, seem less relevant to overcome from the caste-prejudices. Sanju B K,[5] who not only owns a big bungalow at the main city centre but also has recognition as an educated person and a leading civil society member, seems to be convinced that caste-prejudice is more powerful than any of the economic and political empowerment. "Non-dalit neighbours avoid inviting us to many rituals even if we have very good interaction and sharing in day-to-day life", he reveals.

The conclusions, based on the above narratives, can be further substantiated from the following arguments. Prem Sunar,[6] who has a masters degree in sociology and works as a non-gazetted officer in a government office, states:

> One simple example I can give you is that they (so-called upper caste) are biased towards us while we greet each other; most of my juniors who are supposed to respect me, avoid me most of the time so that we do not exchange salutations. I have had such experiences many times. They address all others as 'sir' and 'madam', but try to call me as 'brother' instead of saying 'sir'. Through such attempts, they want to humiliate me.
>
> Also, discrimination comes while taking tea or snacks inside the office. I, in most of the cases, will be the last one to collect tea and snacks from the plate; even if I am seated in the first row of the seating arrangement, they go the other way around and make me the last recipient. Outsiders like you cannot observe such discrimination from which I have been made to suffer.

Khadga Bahadur Nepali,[7] a primary schoolteacher at Bhairab Higher Secondary School, Surkhet, who is economically well off states:

> Most of my neighbours are from non-dalit caste. We share many things but we are not allowed to enter into their home. No one invites us for lunch or dinner. Everything will be discussed and settled outside the home. There will be two separate queues if someone organises a lunch/dinner party.

That must be the reason why he seems reluctant to support and advocate affirmative action policies. Rather he says,

> There are dalits in the leadership but they are hooked in the name of inclusion. Those who are in the position must have benefited from the inclusive policy. But nothing is delivered to the community.

The account of Bimal Nepali,[8] principal of a renowned boarding school – Horizon Academy Boarding School, Surkhet also gives a similar kind of image on the influential role of caste, more than anything else, in the society. He states that no parent of his students invites him "for taking dinner or lunch together with them" even if he is now the principal of one of the reputed boarding schools in town which is considered as one of the prestigious jobs.

Balaram Sunar's[9] – who was the first man to go underground from Surkhet district just after the Maoists of Nepal decided to go for "people's war" – experience also gives a perspective on whether to remove the caste or other disparities first. He states:

> I have a couple of experiences related to caste prejudice during the People's War. There were incidents in which we dalits were left outside and others were taken inside the home at the time of eating. I used to be surprised and even disappointed from my upper caste friends who discriminate us by following the house owner. They did not oppose but accepted the offer like it was their pride to eat inside the home.
>
> One very interesting factor I see today is that people of high caste often try to hide from me so that they are not bound to greet me with a *Namaskar*.
>
> Also, I never find the kind of closeness between dalits and non-dalits even if we work together for the same party. I always find my non-dalit friends' formal behaviour towards me whereas they (non-dalits) often tease each other and even use slang words among them. I do not understand the reason why we could not be that much closer even if we worked together for decades.

The observation of Tara Nepali,[10] a district committee member of Rashtriya Jana Morcha, also throws light on views that do not share the understanding that affirmative action policies for politico-economic mobility and empowerment helps overcome most problems concerning caste based prejudice. In Tara Nepali's opinion, the practice of untouchability is still prevalent in society, and she has been suffering from "not direct but an indirect version of practice of untouchability". She emphasised that while education and employment was helpful in providing dignity, it was not enough to end casteism. In her opinion, there needed to be more emphasis on "free education for all" and affirmative action would be redundant if that was ensured.

On the other hand, other dalits who advocated the need for affirmative action policies argued that such policies were instrumental in bringing a semblance of equality among all sections of society. "Those who have 50-year long experience and a beginner cannot compete with each other at the same time", Sanju B K stated while talking about the need for the policy of affirmative action. He added a rider that reservation should continue based on conditions –

> There is a worldview that only the disqualified could get an opportunity through the quota. That is why capabilities of dalits has been questioned due to the reservation as if there are only less qualified persons available in the marginalised community…we should not be happy by the quota but should proceed further to get the scientific proportional representation based on the population.

Besides, a similar condition has been put forward by Balkrishna Sunar,[11] Chairperson, Rashtriya Jana Morcha while talking about the affirmative action for dalits. According to him, the situation is very complex; on the one hand, affirmative action seems to be a must in a hierarchical society like Nepal. On the other hand, there is a need of putting conditions before introducing such policy so that the needful get benefits. He states:

> Reservation seems to be a good weapon for dalits as they are marginalised by the state. As a goat cannot fight with a tiger without some sort of support, dalits also cannot compete with the rest without such provisions. However, the risk behind it is to assure that the benefit should be reached to the needful. That is why conditions along with time frame should be mentioned along with such provisions.

He seems worried about whether the benefit of the affirmative action would be confined to the dalit elites only. "There is a nexus between the rich dalits, rich brahmins and rich Thakuris. Rich/elite dalits do not help but exploit the poor/marginalised dalits", he further states. Also, Ganesh Nepali who is a district committee member in the Maoist party and also central committee member[12] of the Young Communist League illustrates why reservation alone cannot help overcome caste-based prejudices. He shares:

> I do not believe that the "total emancipation will be seen through education and reservation." Also, I do not argue to lend support to those who are incapable. If we continue to send incapable people, the state will become weak. While addressing the masses, we always advocate affirmative action as the especial rights for the marginalised. It is just for being popular and receiving claps from audiences. But we are well informed about the truth that those who get an opportunity through the channel of special rights are weaker than others.

To substantiate this argument, he brings an account of his own party boss, who he says is much lesser qualified than he is and

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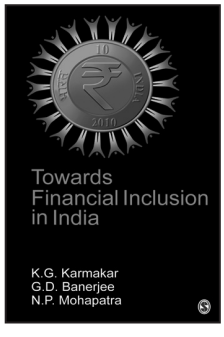

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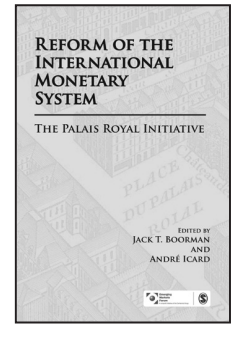

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illustrates this to mention how "social capital" works. "I am working under my in-charge who has studied up to grade 5 only. As he is from a Thakuri lineage, no one dares to raise the question about his lower academic credentials", he mentions. When one hears Balaram Sunar speaking about his inferiority complex,[13] one is compelled to agree with Ganesh Nepali's notion of "social capital" which is lacking for dalits.

Way Forward

International evidence on inter-group disparity suggests that neither growth nor a strong market orientation can guarantee a reduction in inter-group disparity and discrimination (Deshpande and Darity 2003). Having gone through narratives of dalits, and studying government efforts to overcome the marginalisation and exclusion of dalits, it has become clear that the problem cannot be solved through a simplistic approach, i e, introduction of affirmative actions and reservations alone. Since the caste system is complex and constitutes one of the deepest rooted problems in the society, casteism has to be handled with short-term and long-term programmes comprehensively. Programmes such as affirmative action should be introduced for the short-term; and equitable education for all with the objectives of annihilating the caste should be the long-term programme. Let me discuss about how such plans could help to overcome casteism in society.

After narrating different arguments, and after going through the various affirmative action related provisions introduced by the government of Nepal, only affirmative action in general and reservation in particular cannot resolve all the problems faced by Nepali dalits today. Nepal is fortunate in a sense that it could assess various facets of affirmative action programmes practised in the world recently, and introduce a new one based on the best practices even if Nepal's implementation of the programme is decades later than that of India, and other countries. In other words, Nepal has learnt from at least three models – India, US and Malaysia, before introducing a suitable model in Nepal. However, we have to acknowledge that the affirmative action is an absolute necessity at this juncture of Nepal to overcome the enormous problems related to the exclusion and marginalisation (Middleton and Shneiderman 2008).

As discussed earlier, there are various proposals forwarded by NGOs, movement groups, scholars and activists in this regards. If we go through those proposals, most of them suggest replicating the Indian reservation policies without any critical engagements though different names such as "special rights", "progressive reservations", etc, are given by them. There is a debate on whether the policy of affirmative action is to be provisioned as a "compensation" for the historically discriminated and marginalised communities. One may advocate it as a compensation of past mistakes. However, such an argument, in the long run, does not help garner support of the people of privileged groups and has only brought controversy. At one side of the argument, members of the current generation ask as to how long it has to pay for the "sins of its ancestors", while others critically accept reservation as compensation for "past harm" (Chandhok 2005: 239). Darity et al's (1997: 301-05) argument that affirmative action does not, in general, rest on the goal of compensation for past injustices nor does it provide a vehicle for redressal of wealth disparity is quite well taken in the context of the debates today – "Affirmative action programmes largely have been designed to address the questions of present discrimination" (ibid).

In this author's opinion, such programmes are needed due to today's social reality. The opponents should be convinced that de facto and de jure reservation is already accepted and practised by the all societies in many different ways in the past too. And the rich and middle classes have been benefited from it till today (Parthasarathy 2005).

Nepali society seems to have survived in the past in a different manner as there was at least a modicum of a communitarian feeling that bonded various social groups. But as Nepali society transits from tradition to modernity, a visible change is noticed. Division of forms of occupation, labelled as "superior", "inferior" or "graded and "degraded" has however persisted. Works/occupation traditionally associated with the higher castes have continued to be considered as "superior" and work associated with the lower castes – "polluting", "impure", "degraded". Surprisingly such associations and perceptions have persisted even among the economically well off among the lower castes. Indian political leader Rammanohar Lohia had anticipated this almost six decades ago in India, and he had termed this "trend" as a "disease".

> It has been a disease with low-caste Dvijas to look toward their superior counterparts. The wheel of the caste will be broken when the low caste Dvijas begin to look toward backward castes.

In Lohia's (1964) opinion, backward classes needed to have awareness and had to eschew the tendency "to ape the bad habits and manners of the high castes as soon as they [the backward classes] become prosperous and powerful".

Whatever could be the cause attributing notions of "superiority" and "inferiority" (Pyakurel 2009), it has had an impact on society in a strong manner resulting in the tendency of people who want to be recognised as "superior". As there is no controlling mechanism to regulate society as per the caste, and, as the caste-based prejudice is still alive in localities, especially in the villages, the people from earlier depressed castes also want to adopt the "superior" occupation/work. But it is not easy work for them to compete with the people who are born and brought up with the so-called "superior" culture. That is why affirmative action is needed for them as short-term policy as it makes possible to shift a person from a traditionally "inferior" group to a "superior" group. While dealing with it, Ambedkar says:

> There are many occupations in India which on account of the fact that they are regarded as degraded by Hindus provoke those who are engaged in these occupations. There is a constant desire to evade and escape from such occupations which arise solely because of the blighting effect which they produce upon those who follow them owing to the slight and stigma casting on them by the Hindu religion.

In Nepal's case, agricultural workers, for example, have a skill which should be given a high value, as the society is chiefly dependent on its agriculture. But Nepalis attribute it a low value; the wages paid to the agricultural labourers are also abysmally low. If they were paid higher wages, over a period of time their socio-economic situation would improve, their children would be

educated and there would be no need of reservations. But, because of the past and current discrimination, and given the present devaluation of an essential skill, a certain section of the population continues to be deprived, poor and illiterate.

It is worth quoting a Supreme Court Judge of India here who observes:

> It is not a child…who have been brought up in an atmosphere of penury, illiteracy and anti-culture, who are looked down upon by tradition and society, who have no books, newspapers or magazines to read at home, no radio and TV to listen and watch, no private tuitions, no one to help them with their homework, and no one to advise them because their parents themselves are illiterate and ignorant, and who have to trudge to the nearest local board schools or colleges, has this child not got merit, if he with all his disadvantages, is able to secure the qualifying marks of 40% or 50% of the total competitive examination, whereas the children of the upper classes who receive all the advantages, go to the Sacred Heart Convent and St Stephen's College, and who have perhaps been especially coached for the examination may secure 70, 80 or even 90% of marks (quoted in Weisskopf 2005).

It seems that Nepal needs to opt for a different model of reservation policy rather than follow other established models. I do not discount the importance of numerical inclusion (without the division of the "creamy layer" and others) that gives a positive message to the marginalised community that a member of such a community can be a doctor, engineer, professor, village development committee chairperson, district development committee president, party president, minister or even the prime minister.

Focus should also be given to a new policy for avoiding criticisms of policy which for example suggest that benefits of affirmative action do not reach the "real" beneficiaries, but are cornered by the better off sections of second or third generations of the target groups (Sacchidananda 1977: 255 cited in Weisskopf 2005: 394-95). To address the criticism and to reach out the benefit to the targeted, reservation should be made available only for a single generation of the particular family as suggested by Pyakurel (2009). If so, it will be expanded much faster than today, and will not be confined to the families which have already benefited from positive discrimination.

Education as a Long-Term Policy

Indeed, the first target of the long-term policy should be to provide opportunities for education of the people of the marginalised communities. Educational opportunities provide the basic capabilities to lead a life with elementary freedom, and exclusion from this basic capability further contributes to make the process of economic growth less participatory (Sen 2000: 25). Experiences reveal that every developed country including today's Japan[14] advanced through provision of sufficient educational opportunities to all that helps in minimising the exclusion of the marginalised. Also, the US and Malaysian policies of affirmative actions were successful only due to education. Since the African-Americans and other minorities in US capitalised upon the educational opportunities and became conscious citizens, they succeeded in increasing the presence of the members in the minority community in each and every sector largely through "community-based economic pressures".[15] Hence, business houses were compelled to provide opportunities to African-Americans in America. In Malaysia also, the primary focus of the New Economic Policy 1971, which has been considered as a form of affirmative action, was to get the considerably marginalised indigenous Malay community educated despite the fact that the community was in the majority in terms of its numbers in the overall population.

There is always a kind of correlation between opportunity and education. Education is now primarily linked with employment, especially with white-collar jobs and both education and employment together determine the nature and degree of social change and social mobility among the people in India (Ram 1995: 22). That is why Ambedkar had greatly emphasised on education of the dalits with the view that only education could liberate them from their traditional bondage and subordination to the upper castes and classes. Education, in his opinion, would enlighten them and expose them to the outside world. It, for him, would sensitise them to realise their long cherished goals of embracing quality, liberty, fraternity and justice. Besides, it would also prepare them to collectively strive for achieving a respectful social identity (ibid). In fact, educated people search for opportunities in any case; if they do not get it, they not only protest on the spot but also raise the issue through media, public opinion, etc. However, an uneducated person easily internalises the same thing considering it as matter of fate or fortune (Pyakurel 2010).

As far as Nepal's situation is considered, a huge amount of the budget[16] has gone to the government schools in the name of educating the marginalised community. It has brought a substantive change in the educational level of marginalised groups too as both the literacy rate and enrolment rate has increased. On the other hand, many problematic aspects in the education system, i e, the increased dropout rate, have also come to light. According to a report, the dropout rate of dalit students from primary to secondary level education is more than 95% (Regmi 2007). Such a dropout is due to two main causes: (1) the dalit community could not see their future as being improved even after they got educated from the government schools; and (2) they found the education attaining process a lengthy one and therefore lost their patience with it. Here, it can be said that the government, through various means and policies, succeeded in increasing the marginalised group's thrust on education. However, they are yet to be assured that education helps change their whole lifestyle. It is due to the fact that they, being newcomers in the education system, they are not confident enough to rely on opportunities related to education and feel that they are lacking in "cultural capital" (Beteille 1999: 44).

The 2006-07 fiscal budget of Nepal after the Jana Andolan-II tried to initiate provisions for scholarships in every private school using the public-private-partnership model enabling dalits by attributing a high priority level for their participation in this model. One out of every 15 students of each private school was entitled for education with the provision of scholarships. It was not enough but was also a good initiative for offering competent education for the marginalised groups in the long-term. However, the following year onwards, the government failed to continue this excellent provision. On the contrary, the Maoist-led

government came up with a proposal to commercialise education by provisioning certain taxes on the schools as well.

The introduction of a Common School System (CSS)[17] can be a long-term policy towards minimising the gaps, and feeling of social segregation, without which none of the developed countries would have reached their present level of economic progress and prosperity. It was the CSS which enabled the countries to not only forge national unity and social cohesion essential for modernisation but also directly contributed to nation-building and economic progress.[18] Scholarship programmes will work only after disparities within the educational institutions are removed – a possibility if the CSS system is implemented properly.

Annihilation of Caste as a Long-Term Policy

As mentioned in the previous sections, caste is a very deep-rooted reality even today in various south Asian countries. And the Indian experience shows that it cannot be removed simply by the introduction of affirmative action or reservation policies. The most dangerous aspect one finds in India is that the "new middle classes", among the marginalised communities, even after fast leaving their "marginalised" statuses seem to be interested in limiting the benefits of the reservation policies to their own offsprings. This has not drawn criticism from others in the marginalised brethren as "their caste members look at them as their positive reference for achieving upward social mobility" (Ram 1995: 24). That is why; they still behave the sole representatives of the dalit masses even if they are not truly concerned about the plight of the poorer dalits.[19] There is also the problem that economic self-sufficiency aided through affirmative action has not change the socio-economic status of those benefiting from such policies. Ram's (1995: 24) views about the travails of an "upwardly mobile dalit member" are revealing. He says:

> The upwardly mobile dalits mostly living in urban areas have accepted values and behaviour pattern(s) of the middle classes as their positive reference of emulation though they are not yet fully absorbed in their reference groups. In the process, they have largely cutoff their affinal ties with the dalit masses. They are, thus, neither part of the 'out group' or their reference group nor of 'in group' of the dalit masses. Hence, not being a member of either group, they are marginalised though for some reason or the other they still continue their allegiance to the latter group. Their 'in group' is also apparent as their caste members look at them as their positive reference for achieving upward social mobility.

Thinkers from India, such as Ambedkar and Lohia, were aware of the various limitations of any kind of affirmative action for the emancipation of dalits from the caste-based social order. They concluded that no reform is possible unless the problem of caste is tackled. There would be "no economic reform without first bringing about a reform of the social order" (Ambedkar 2007: 12). Lohia (1964) mentions in a letter to a Sudra, in March 1953.

> It is certain that without first tackling this problem [caste], no reconstruction of the country is possible, not to say anything about the advent of socialism.

Both Ambedkar and Lohia were very keen for the eradication of casteism so that caste-based prejudice could be eliminated and other social reform programmes could be implemented in a systemic manner in combating class-based disparity and inequality. Though they both advocated one or other model of the reservation policy, they were convinced that only reservation would not be helpful for the depressed classes to overcome from caste-based atrocities and prejudices. That is why Ambedkar defined caste similar to a monster, and said that you "turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform; you cannot have economic reform; unless you kill this monster" (Ambedkar 2007: 14; also see Pyakurel 2011). Ambedkar further states:

> There is no doubt, in my opinion, that unless you change your social order you can achieve little by way of progress. You cannot mobilise the community either for defence or for offence. You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build up a nation; you cannot build up a morality. Anything that you will build on the foundations of caste will crack and will never be a whole (ibid).

Both of them suggested inter-caste marriage and inter-dining would be the first and foremost step for the purpose of annihilating the caste system. In fact, Lohia proposed to enhance the trend of out-caste marriage by providing government jobs (Pyakurel 2011) "only to those who marry out of caste" along with the *jati-todo*[20] (break caste barriers) campaign. Ambedkar also proposed to go for an end of hereditary priesthood along with popularisation of the trend of inter-caste marriage and inter-dinning. Only after the early 1930s did he gave up any hope of reforming Hinduism as he felt that those suggestions would not be acceptable to Hindus (Rodrigues 2002: 26). Then, he attempted to construct a separate identity for "untouchables" during the second half of the 1940s. Then he kept on advocating for the quota for the Depressed Classes in the economic and socio-political arenas along with the separate electorate until his death.

Conclusions

Nepal has to handle its disparities with comprehensive packages, and exhibit a "strong political will" to fulfil the objective. Since there are different marginalised groups with different scales of marginalisation, Nepal has to come up with policies and programmes to tackle all the problems simultaneously, and on priority basis. As there is no doubt that the dalits are the most marginalised groups, highest priority should be provided to their interests by removing hurdles faced by them. As narrated before, caste seems to be the most powerful hurdle to overcome before making them as equal as their counterparts. And, affirmative action policies in the form of reservation and preferential treatment are necessary but not sufficient in annihilating casteism from society. That is why, Nepal must introduce a new policy with the priority to dismantle the concept of "different schools for different people", and create a CSS with the objective to provide same education for all.

Also, it seems better for Nepal to follow the model of affirmative action policy implemented in US and Malaysia which have fixed a target rather than the quota in India. For, the former seems to be less controversial than the quota-based system. It helps in creating less disparity between members of marginalised groups as no one from such a group would be stopped from capitalising on opportunities provided to the group as a whole.

Finally, based on Ambedkar's and Lohia's thoughts and experiences in India, Nepal should think hard about a programme to annihilate caste from society as it is the root cause of prejudices and marginalisation. For that, the Budhanilkantha School model which discourages the students from disclosing and mentioning their surname after their name may be taken as model for a "surname avoid *abhiyan* (campaign)" and can be proceeded further with. That ultimately helps in encouraging inter-caste marriages and practices such as inter-dining as one knows nothing about his/her own, and friend's castes. Only then would caste-based prejudices along with the consequent marginalisation be wiped out.

NOTES

1 Out of the total strength of 601 of the full House, 216 members are from the ethnic communities, 196 from Madhesi, 198 women, and only 50 dalits.

2 A Nepali Congress district committee member, who served as an elected ward chairman of Birendranagar Municipality Ward No 4 (his views here are based on his interview with the researcher, 16 September 2009).

3 According to her, her husband used to remove his name-card while he reached nearby their room. "As my face is flat, similar to the face of Magars (one of the ethnic groups of Nepal), I introduced myself as Magar and managed to stay there", she states (based on interview with the researcher, 2 November 2009).

4 Based on personal interview with researcher on 18 September 2009.

5 Based on personal interview with researcher on 5 November 2009.

6 Based on personal interview with researcher on 16 June 2009.

7 Based on personal interview with researcher on 2 November 2009.

8 Based on personal interview with researcher on 5 November 2009.

9 Based on personal interview with researcher on 5 November 2009.

10 Based on personal interview with researcher on 17 September 2009.

11 Based on personal interview with researcher on 12 September 2009.

12 Discussion with author on 18 September 2009.

13 He is one of the senior-most Maoists in Surkhet who went underground first in Surkhet as per the party's decision (discussed with the researcher on 5 November 2009).

14 According to Sen, Japan become the model of market economy in the world only because of the priority given to education by the Meji Era (1868-1911) though it was economically still quite underdeveloped. For details, see Sen (2005: 25).

15 They will watch TV shows to which they can relate, and they will buy the products advertised on those shows. They will also tend to buy goods from the companies, which they know employ their own people, and produce the product that they see as relevant to them" (Gail Omvedt 2005).

16 The fiscal year 2007/2208 budget provisioned scholarships with the amount of NRs 350 per year to all dalits who are in the primary level education.

17 A common school system is a system of education-providing education of an equitable quality to all children irrespective of their caste, creed, community, language, gender, economic condition, social status and physical and mental ability. The system calls for the application of common minimum norms of quality education by all schools in the system so that no parent would ordinarily feel any need to send his/her child to the institution outside the system.

18 For details, see the report submitted by the Common School System Commission to the Government of Bihar, 8 June 2007.

19 For example, government has provisioned certain quota at primary level education in the public schools for marginalised community. Also, the government has provided land in a token money to the hospitals in Delhi with the condition to offer 20% free treatment facilities to the poor and down-trodden community. No adequate voice has been raised by the activists and others even if it is not implemented.

20 Lohia's main message was *jati-todo* (break caste barriers) which included not wearing the sacred thread and dropping caste names.

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